

World of Polyphony

PAUL HENRY LANG

J. S. BACH: "Clavier Übung." Ralph Kirkpatrick, harpsichord, Paul Calaway, organ. (Haydn Society HSL 3056-3062, \$41.65)

BACH'S entire life was spent in German towns and minor princely residences, and unlike some of the celebrated German composers of the eighteenth century, Handel, Hasse, Gluck, or Mozart, he never reached the great cultural and musical centers of the world. Yet this simple provincial musician somehow managed to acquire a comprehensive acquaintance with the music of the world, which he then proceeded to organize into *summae*. We know Bach as the embodiment of the High Baroque, and yet behind the heavy blocks of that baroque music, its triumphant chords and dramatic gestures, there hid the long past wonders of Netherlandish music. There was scarcely a living soul in the mature Bach's time who could receive this Gothic message, and if we want to be frank, we must admit that we too are at times puzzled by the echoes that come to us across the centuries, but we cannot escape the feeling that we are listening to the greatest architectural genius of musical history. For Bach wanted to design, to organize, to build. He was not a man of his time and he knew it, but that did not disturb him. Quietly and methodically surveying the musical output of the world, he selected what seemed acceptable to him, rejecting the uncongenial. Having mastered his material, he proceeded with Olympian sureness and grandeur to organize all this into apotheoses. Every group of works, especially the instrumental ones, his very own domain, represents such a summation and last testament, but even some individual works or subdivisions of groups (e.g., the "Goldberg Variations" in this recording) are often unmistakably final syntheses.

There are many remarkable facts surrounding this large collection of keyboard music, called "Clavier Übung," that point to a conscious effort to present the world with a

summa of keyboard music. First of all, these four collections constitute practically the only keyboard music of Bach's published in his own lifetime. Then there is the infinite care lavished on formal and textural variety as well as on contrapuntal treatment. The composer's preoccupation with regional styles is so marked that he even insists on linguistic differentiation in the titles and musical terms employed. An Italian *corrente*, with its uncomplicated fluid movement, is quite different from a French *courante*, with its piquant rhythms and capricious phrase lengths. Still another feature is his endeavor to present, in keyboard version, the chief types of orchestral music of his generation. The organ works, too, are so arranged as to sum up that most characteristic of Lutheran churchly instrumental music, the chorale prelude. Since they are prefaced by a great prelude and concluded by a colossal triple fugue, all types of organ music are represented.

The performing artists are masters of their instrument, but they are much more than that, they are devoted students and connoisseurs of the music they are interpreting. It is a rare pleasure to listen to their beautiful phrasing, fastidiously clean and

correct ornamentation, spacious tempi, and wonderful feeling for part-writing. The harpsichord is crisp and clear as a bell, the organ not an *ersatz* orchestra but the interpreter of linear design ranging all the way from intimate lyricism to inexorable fugal maze. It must be noted that even the engineering was entrusted to a sensitive and cultivated musician, so it is no wonder that this unusual combination resulted in one of the most felicitous products the record industry has produced to date. We might add that the Haydn Society, always careful about their "commentators," did not have to look far for one, because Mr. Kirkpatrick is a seasoned musicologist who supplies his own notes.

This magnificent album of seven records is no doubt an expensive affair in terms of first cost, but since it supplies its owner with musical fare for years to come, the dollars actually shrink to cents when pro-rated. For this music cannot be casually absorbed, and a lifetime is none too long a span to enable the listener to discover all that the discs guard in their grooves. This is so because great as his musical ideas are, Bach's immense power rests on his shaping, architectural genius, on his ability to elaborate an idea in fantastic variety, under countless aspects, without exhausting it. It takes time, much time, to discover these wonders of ingenuity and I can think of nothing more rewarding than to sit down with this set, score in hand, and let these able artists conjure up again and again the mysteries of a thousand-year-old world of polyphony.



Ralph Kirkpatrick—"a seasoned musicologist."

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